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Examiners' Report Summer 2009

GCE

GCE Music Technology (8MT01)

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6MT01/01 Music Technology Portfolio

The main differences between this unit in the new specification and the corresponding papers of the previous (legacy) specification may be summarised as follows.

Broadly speaking, Unit 1 is an amalgamation of Paper 6713 (Sequencing and Recording) and 6714 (Arranging) with the addition of a more substantial written component in the logbook. The tasks are more demanding, but they are fewer in number. There is no longer a requirement to study music from the Western classical tradition.

For Task 1A (Sequenced Realised Performance) candidates are required to recreate a song set by Edexcel, working from an original recording and a skeleton score placed on the website in September. This year the song was Soft Cell's *Tainted Love*.

For task 1B they are required to make a multi-track recording of a popular song of their choice. A minimum of 8 tracks is required (including a minimum of four captured using mics). This is more than the number of tracks required by the legacy specification but only one recording is required.

For task 1C they are required to make an arrangement, choosing one of two songs set by Edexcel in one of two prescribed musical styles. The songs, which this year were Dido's *No Angel* and The Doors' *Light my Fire*¸ were published in lead sheet form along with the stimulus for Task 1A. The two styles were 80s rock and Urban R&B.
There is no requirement to produce a score.

The logbook includes two questions on the arrangement in which candidates are required to explain how they created their arrangement and how it relates to the chosen style. Quality of written communication (QWC) is taken into account.

Overview

The standards set by the previous specification were maintained, with a similar spread of marks. The mean mark was 80.8 (out of 140). In percentage terms (57%) this compares very well with the mean marks of the legacy papers; 6713 (60%) and 6714 (55%). Most portfolios were slightly unbalanced, with candidates tending to do quite well, or very well, on one task and less well on one or more of the others. Generally the questions in the log were poorly done.

Sequenced Realised Performance

The principal challenges of *Tainted Love* were to re-create the nuances of the lead vocal and backing vocal parts and to select a suitable timbre for this and, in addition, to replicate the swing feel. This is primarily an aural task in which the skeleton score is used merely as a guide although some candidates appeared to have misunderstood the task and sequenced only the material that was given in the skeleton score, omitting everything else on the track.
Most candidates succeeded in scoring quite highly for accuracy of pitch.

Some candidates had difficulty with grace notes and accidentals and some placed the vocals in the wrong octave largely as a result of not correctly identifying the octave register of their chosen timbre. More errors tended to be made with rhythm, the most common being a failure to re-create the swing feel by using straight quavers instead or an unsuitable military dotted rhythm.
Many of the weaker submissions suffered from untidy ensemble, usually due to careless copying and pasting.

As in the past many sequences suffered from lack of attention to musical shaping. This was most common in candidates who had opted for step entry of the data and where no effort had been made subsequently to edit the default settings for velocity and note length. There was thus much work that was accurate but mechanical.
The stronger candidates succeeded in using pitch bend to replicate the slides in the vocal parts but slides of more than a tone were not always convincingly executed.
Few candidates scored well on dynamic shaping despite opportunities to provide this in the vocal parts.

Choice of timbre was generally successful although to judge from the logs much time was spent searching for a good match with few candidates bothering to edit their sounds. The most successful choices were saxophone, lead synth timbres and, in a few notably good cases, electric guitar. Some of the less suitable choices included piano, and percussive instruments whose sound envelope was completely unrelated to that of a vocal timbre. Common balance problems included loss of the backing vocals in the mix and over prominent drums.

Many sequences suffered from a lack of finish. This included missing upbeats (especially at the very start) and failure to provide a fade at the end although generally the recording quality was quite high.

Multi-track Recording

There were a number of specification infringements.
The most common was failure to record the required number of eight tracks or not using the required four mics. In these cases the examiners made a pro-rata reduction of the mark for this task.
Not all candidates completed their logs clearly in this respect – for example by listing drums as a single entry so as to suggest that the kit had been recorded on a single track, or failing to identify stereo inputs for a keyboard.

Some recordings were incomplete; either too short in duration to constitute a viable song, or with insufficient instruments for a viable performance (for example a recording of a drum track on its own).

The song to be recorded must be commercially available or an accepted rock, pop or jazz standard.
A number of enquiries were received asking Edexcel to clarify the meaning of 'commercially available'. A broad definition is 'in the public domain' – that is, publicly available in the music stores as a CD or in sheet music form or on the internet. It does not extend to student compositions unless these conditions can be met.

Capture was generally good.

The examiners commented on the number of recordings that enterprisingly featured acoustic instruments; strings, reeds and brass. Kits tended to be mic'd with care although the capture of backing vocals and hand-held percussion tended to be weaker.
Some candidates were over-ambitious, recording up to 24 tracks - with varying degrees of success.

The most common cause of loss of marks was poor processing.
EQ did not receive as much attention as it deserved and this tended to show especially in lead parts, during solos and when instruments were exposed.
Many candidates did not seem to have realised the importance of listening critically to solo tracks. Use of the compressor was often misjudged and employed as a crude means of controlling dynamics without realising how much over-control might affect the quality of the signals and their positions in the mix. This applies equally to use of effects. Vocals tended to be quite dry or subject to inappropriate levels or types of reverb.
Poor processing was thus one of the weaker features of this unit and commented upon by all the examiners.

Mixes were generally well balanced although the use of the stereo field often lacked imagination. Panning was also one of the least clearly documented aspects of the log. Some candidates either documented an elaborate set-up, only to present a final mono recording, or failed to document anything at all.

Arrangement

Overall, this was the least successful of the three tasks with the widest spread of marks although there were some outstanding pieces of work.
No Angel was marginally the more popular song and R&B the more popular style.

There were a number of infringements, the most common being the inclusion of a live vocal track. In these cases the examiners marked only the sequenced tracks.
The brief was quite clear on this point; this is a sequenced task and continuous audio tracks are not acceptable.
However, short samples may be edited and processed and incorporated into the arrangement.

Many candidates misunderstood the task, simply adding a backing to the given material and failing to understand that in an arrangement some creative additions and reworking of the original are expected.
Additions often lacked musical control and were subject to over repetition and a loss of direction.
Many examiners commented on the extent of uncontrolled harmony and, of all the optional criteria, this was the one least chosen.

Style was not always fully focused. The examiners allowed for quite a wide variation in the interpretation of the chosen style but there were some approaches that were way off the mark.

The use of music technology was integral to the task and the mark awarded was often the result of a 'best fit' since the descriptors covered a wide area including choice of timbre (frequently inappropriate), balance (usually good) and articulation and phrasing (often mechanical, as in the case of Task 1).

The Logbook

These were mostly clearly presented and helpful. Some centres offered standard photographs on page 5 – for example of a mic'd kit or piano - which seemed to suggest that all their candidates has employed the same set up. It was only after listening and closer scrutiny of the log that this proved not to be the case.

Many examiners commented on the disappointing standard of response to questions 9 and 10. This part of the portfolio carries 20 marks – half those allocated to the other tasks – and it is therefore to be expected that some care and attention is given to it, the more so since it does not have to be completed under exam conditions and notes may be referred to whilst writing up the questions. Moreover, the necessity to meet criteria for QWC (Quality of Written Communication) resulted in a loss of marks when answers were disorganised and full of elementary spelling errors. Many candidates achieved less than half marks.

Most answers suffered from a lack of detail. There is no requirement to write long passages of critical prose (bullet points are acceptable) but references need to be supported by clear examples and locations.
For example, a response such as the one below is simply not specific enough for a high mark:

> 'The songs [sic] texture varies a lot in the song starting off thin then getting thicker building up to a bigger emphasis on the bridge and chorus'

On the other hand this is far more illuminating and shows evidence of thought and planning:

> 'The original *Light my Fire* had 2-3 minute guitar and organ solos but this structure was suited to the time the song was composed and doesn't suit an 80s rock song so I changed the structure to Intro, V1, Chorus, V2, Chorus, Guitar solo, Chorus, Outro.'

Administration

Centres seem to have found the simpler format of this unit - with fewer discs and less paperwork - easy to work with.
There were a few problems that occurred at the final burning stage and it was not uncommon to find the odd blank disc in the work of a centre. Not all centres packed their CDs carefully resulting in some damage during transit.
Some centres failed to realise that the declaration is at the back of the logbook and sent it off unsigned.

6MT02/01 Listening and Analysing

General Notes

Candidates were generally well prepared by centres to meet the needs of the new listening paper.
The first four questions, being very similar in style to 6715/01, proved not to be a problem for the majority of candidates. The Special Focus style questions were the main departure in the new specification and were generally answered well with most candidates demonstrating that they had the **breadth** of knowledge required to answer these questions and a sound understanding of the focus styles.

Question 1

Q1(a)-(e) were mostly well answered, but quite a few candidates had difficulties with the music questions (c) and (d) with ¾ and 3rds being common wrong answers.

Q1(f) was a differentiation question. Most candidates did not have the knowledge or vocabulary to describe the technical meaning of flange, but most knew the term and were able to describe the sonic qualities of the effect.

Q1(g) saw a significant number of candidates ticking only **one** box rather than **two** as requested in the question.

Question 2

A significant number of candidates found the dance style in Q(c) difficult to identify.

Q2(d), another technology question, saw many candidates repeating the given example in different words. Others answered with information about other aspects of production which were not related specifically to delay.

Question 3

Q3(c) was well answered by a good deal of candidates with many scoring full marks, demonstrating secure knowledge of mic placement. Weaker candidates' responses were often either vague in terms of placement, 'point the mics at the strings', or ignored the **close mic** phrase in the question, resulting in descriptions of ambient set-up.

A large number of candidates described **mulitimbral** rather than **polyphonic** synths in **Q3(d)**.

Question 4

Q4(a) resulted in some good responses from candidates. A large number identified the use of the talk box although quite a few described the talk box as being used to modulate a vocal track rather than guitar. Panning was almost always correctly identified, demonstrating that candidates were wearing headphones correctly.
Many candidates referred to compression in Q(c), demonstrating that they were, perhaps, unaware of what the term **dynamic processing** means.

Question 5

Many candidates found **Q5(a)** difficult. Most frequently, the responses for the **improvement** column belonged in the **how this has been achieved** column, where the initial response was repeated, eg 'The guitars have been panned separately' and 'the guitars have been panned due to modern recording equipment'. A model answer would be 'Use of stereo field has been improved as you would expect the original to be mono and this is stereo' and 'By recording guitars onto individual tracks, they can be panned left and right in the stereo field'.

Q5(d) elicited some good responses with candidates often referring to milliseconds for the first part. The second part, concerning how this FX was originally created was less well answered, however, with many candidates describing reverb rather than slap back.

Q5(e) saw most candidates choosing either Chuck Berry or Jerry Lee Lewis. Surprisingly, candidates who chose to write about Sam Phillips tended to score full marks more frequently than those who didn't. Poor responses tended to be vague with general references such as 'Berry was very popular' or 'Jerry Lee Lewis was very influential'.

Question 6

Q6(a) was generally well handled by most candidates, with references to both musical and technological methods of achieving different textures.

Candidates showed a good knowledge of different methods of scratching in **Q6(c)**, resulting in a high number of candidates scoring full marks.

Q6(d) elicited good responses from candidates whose technological vocabulary was sound. Some candidates were confused by some of the terms used, describing panning in the EQ box, EQ in the FX processing box etc. Centres should take care that candidates are familiar with the meaning of all of the terms included in this question.

Q6(f) suffered from similar problems to Q5(e) in that many were vague and/or did not make **two** clear points about each artist. Most candidates were aware that The Sugarhill Gang were the originators of popular rap, that Public Enemy had a socio-political agenda and that Nelly moved rap into the realms of mainstream urban R'n'B.

Grade Boundaries

6MT01

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	140	102	92	82	72	62
Uniform boundary mark	140	112	98	84	70	56

6MT02

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	80	50	44	39	34	29
Uniform boundary mark	60	48	42	36	30	24

Notes

Maximum Mark (Raw): the mark corresponding to the sum total of the marks shown on the mark scheme.

Boundary mark: the minimum mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

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